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ABSTRACT

Great ideas about law, government, and the rights of individuals, embedded in U.S. founding documents, are the connective cords by which national unity and civic identity have been maintained in the United States from the 1770s until today. To be a citizen is to understand and have a reasonable commitment to the ideas in the founding documents. This digest (1) identifies four founding documents and the great ideas in them; (2) discusses inclusion of the founding documents and great ideas in the core curriculum of schools; and (3) provides an annotated list of World Wide Web sites for teachers and learners on the founding documents and the great ideas in these primary sources. (Contains a list of 12 references and ERIC resources.) (BT)

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John J. Patrick

ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, Bloomington, IN.
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Teaching America's Founding Documents

By John J. Patrick

Great ideas about law, government, and the rights of individuals marked the founding of the United States of America during the last quarter of the 18th century. These ideas, embedded in America's founding documents, are the connective cords by which national unity and civic identity have been maintained in the United States from the 1770s until today. To be an American is to understand and to have a reasonable commitment to the ideas in America's founding documents. This Digest (1) identifies four founding documents and the great ideas in them; (2) discusses inclusion of the founding documents and great ideas in the core curriculum of schools, and (3) provides an annotated list of World Wide Web sites for teachers and learners on the founding documents and the great ideas in these primary sources.

Four Founding Documents and the Great Ideas in Them. Four key documents of the founding era in United States history are: (1) the Declaration of Independence (1776), (2) the Constitution of the United States (1787), (3) the Federalist Papers (1787-88), and (4) the Bill of Rights (1791).

The Declaration of Independence, approved by the Second Continental Congress on July 4, 1776, proclaimed and justified the separation of 13 American colonies from the United Kingdom of Great Britain and the establishment of a new nation, the United States of America. This founding document includes the criteria by which to determine whether or not a government is good and thereby worthy of support by people living under its authority. The first criterion is that governments are created by the people for the primary purpose of guaranteeing or protecting their God-given rights to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." The second criterion is that a government derives its authority from the consent of the governed, the people. A good government satisfies these two criteria or at least recognizes and addresses them, even if it does so imperfectly. A bad government either willfully disregards these two criteria or addresses them ineptly. If a bad government is impervious to improvement in terms of the two criteria, then the people have a right to revolution to change it, which is what Americans did through their War of Independence, 1775-1783.

The Constitution—written during the Federal Convention at Philadelphia in 1787, ratified in 1788, and implemented in 1789—is a frame of government for the United States that has continued in effect until today. This founding document includes several ideas on government compatible with the Declaration of Independence. The Constitution, for example, provides the rule of law and limited government by consent of the governed to "secure the blessings of liberty" and other natural rights of individuals. Constitutional principles such as separation of powers, checks and balances, and federalism are means to constitutional or limited government by which despotism is prevented and the rights of individuals are protected.

The Federalist Papers were written by Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay to advocate ratification of the 1787 Constitution. Thomas Jefferson proclaimed this work "the best commentary on the principles of government which was ever written." From 1789 until today, lawyers, judges, politicians, and scholars have used the Federalist Papers to inform their thinking about the great ideas on government in the U.S. Constitution.

The Bill of Rights, Amendments 1-10 of the Constitution, was proposed by Congress in 1789 and ratified by the states in 1791. The great ideas of civil liberties and due process of law are the core of the Bill of Rights. In concert with the main body of the Constitution, Amendments 1-10 exemplify the criteria for good government proclaimed in the second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence. The 1787 Constitution and 1791 Bill of Rights provide a framework for government based on popular consent, which is limited by the rule of law in order to guarantee the rights of everyone in the polity.

Including the Founding Documents in the Core Curriculum. The great ideas in America's founding documents are essential to education for citizenship in the United States. Without knowledge of the great ideas in these documents one cannot understand, analyze, and appraise the great issues and events of United States history. So the teaching and learning of American history in schools should be anchored in analysis and discussion of the founding documents and ideas.

From the founding era to the present, the founding ideas and documents have been at the center of the major debates about public issues that have shaped the development of constitutional democracy in the United States. They were, for example, prominent parts of the conflicts that led to the Civil War. The post-war issues of Reconstruction were rooted in the founding documents and ideas and brought about the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the Constitution. Further, landmark issues and decisions of the U.S. Supreme Court cannot be understood without knowledge of the ideas in America's founding documents. Finally, the great 20th-century movements in U.S. history for civil rights and liberties of women and ethnic/racial minorities were conducted in terms of the great ideas in America's founding documents. So the pivotal issues and decisions in U.S. history which are associated with the founding documents and ideas should be focal points of student inquiry and classroom discussion.

Despite the great power and positive utility of the founding ideas and documents in U.S. history, the civic and political tradition they represent is always at risk. It will wither and die unless it is cultivated by teachers and students of each generation. So these ideas and documents belong in the core curriculum of elementary and secondary schools.

Although the founding documents and ideas appear to be established in the curriculum of schools in the United States, their place may not be as prominent or secure as it should be.

John J. Patrick is Director of the ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, Director of the Social Studies Development Center, and Professor of Education at Indiana University.

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The educational agenda has been crowded and priorities often have been unclear, which has produced curricular fragmentation and incoherence.

In many schools, studying the founding documents and ideas may be no more important than a vast array of competing goals of education. So there is a need for revitalization of education on America's founding documents and the great ideas in them. In recognition of this need, President George W. Bush announced on September 17, 2002 a new program in history and civic education that will emphasize core ideas and documents in the American heritage of constitutional democracy and civil liberty. Information about this educational initiative and resources for teachers to address it can be found at the following World Wide Web site created by the National Archives and Records Administration and the National History Day project: <www.ourdocuments.gov>.

Using Internet Resources. The Internet is a rich source of primary documents in United States history. The following Web sites include documents from the founding era and subsequent periods that can be used to teach about the core ideas of American constitutional democracy and issues related to their development from the 1770s until the present.

U.S. Founding Documents: A Project of the Law School of Emory University. This site includes copies of the U.S. Constitution of 1787, the Federalist Papers, and the Bill of Rights of 1791: <www.law.emory.edu/FEDERAL/>.

Teaching American History: A Project of the Ashbrook Center for Public Affairs. Search this site for select documents on American political thought from the founding era through the post-World War II era: <teachingamericanhistory.org/library/>.

National Archives and Records Administration: Digital Classroom, Teaching with Documents. This site contains reproducible copies of primary documents and teaching activities based on those documents pertaining to periods of U.S. history from the American Revolution to the present: <www.archives.gov/digital_classroom/teaching_with_documents.html>.

AMDOCS: University of Kansas. This site provides documents in American history from the 15th-century era of exploration until the present. The late 18th-century era of the American Revolution and founding of the United States is amply treated with a wide variety of sources including those on political thought, constitutionalism, and individual rights. The site also features copies of the original 13 states' constitutions, the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, the U.S. Constitution of 1787, the Federalist Papers, and the Bill of Rights of 1791: <www.ku.edu/carrie/docs/amdocs_index.html>.

The Library of Congress: Collection Connections. This section of the American Memory Collection contains documents from the Continental Congress, the Constitutional Convention, and the state ratifying conventions, 1774-1788: <lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/collections/revolt/index.htm>.

U.S. Historical Documents: The University of Oklahoma, College of Law. Constitutional documents in the Anglo-American heritage are included in this collection, which extends from the Magna Carta of 1215 through the present: <www.law.ou.edu/hist/>.

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References and ERIC Resources. The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are available in microfiche and/or paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110, Springfield, Virginia 22153-2852; World Wide Web <edrs.com>; telephone numbers are (703) 440-1400 and (800) 443-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number, annotated monthly in CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION (CIJE), are not available through EDRS. However, they can be located in the journal section of most larger libraries by using the bibliographic information provided, requested through Interlibrary Loan, or ordered from commercial reprint services.

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